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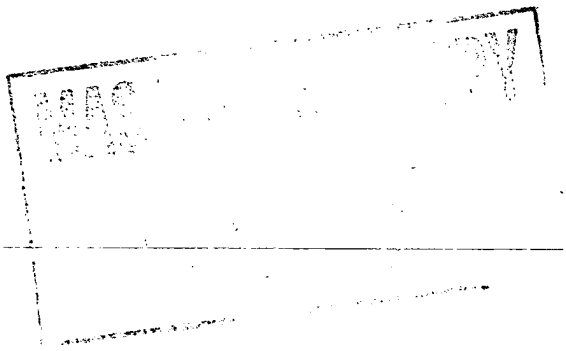

Sudan's Nimeiri: Surviving in a Tumultuous Period

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An Intelligence Assessment

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NESA 83-10130
June 1983

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Sudan's Nimeiri: Surviving in a Tumultuous Period

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An Intelligence Assessment

This paper was prepared by
the Office of Near East–South Asia Analysis. It was
coordinated with the Directorate of Operations and
the National Intelligence Council.

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Comments and queries are welcome and may be
directed to the Chief, Arab-Israeli Division,

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Key Judgments

Information available as of 24 May 1983 was used in this report.

President Nimeiri's ability to maintain the loyalty of the Army and his skill at keeping domestic opponents off balance have enabled him to surmount a series of challenges to his rule over the past several years. Early last year Nimeiri's situation appeared precarious, but during the past few months the pressures on him have eased.

- The military for the most part appears loyal to the President and probably would support him in any repetition of the crisis of January 1982, when he dismissed several senior officers after they criticized his leadership.
- A Libyan-sponsored coup attempt by Sudanese dissidents in February 1983 was aborted, and foreign-supported subversive groups remain disunited.
- The approval of a new International Monetary Fund standby agreement in January 1983 and the rescheduling of Sudan's official debt in February have reduced the threat of default for the present.

Nimeiri, however, still faces serious problems that could rapidly reverse his fortunes. The economy is unlikely to show much improvement over the next few years, resulting in worsening living conditions for most Sudanese. The country's poor international credit rating and the need for continued IMF assistance will compel the government to impose additional, highly unpopular austerity measures. Rising public discontent could lead to antiregime demonstrations. If these are widespread and prolonged, the Army's loyalty to the regime could be seriously tested.

Regional differences remain strong, and antinorthern violence in the south is increasing. The allegiance of the armed forces could be eroded by a large-scale military intervention in the south or by the outbreak of civil war. There also is a continuing risk of assassination attempts against Nimeiri by Libyan-backed dissidents.

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Sudan's Nimeiri: Surviving in a Tumultuous Period

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Events in Sudan in late 1982 and early 1983 have once again demonstrated President Jaafar Nimeiri's ability to overcome serious challenges to his authority. Despite continued economic deterioration and widespread public resentment over IMF-mandated austerity measures, the regime has been able to prevent extensive antigovernment demonstrations. The failure of a Libyan-sponsored coup attempt in February 1983 has reduced, but not eliminated, the dissident threat to the government.

In a pro forma national plebiscite held in late April, in which Nimeiri was the only candidate, Nimeiri was reelected to a third six-year term.

Nimeiri's ability to survive in the face of wide-ranging problems and pressures is due in large part to the absence of a cohesive opposition. Nimeiri has employed his considerable political skills to keep his domestic opponents off balance and prevent the development of clear alternatives to his leadership. As of early 1983 there was no opposition leader acceptable to all of Sudan's disparate political, religious, and tribal groups. According to Embassy reporting, southern resentment over perceived northern neglect and discrimination is growing and could develop into a serious problem for the regime, but we do not believe that a recurrence of hostilities between the north and south paralleling the civil war of 1955-72 is imminent.

Nimeiri's room to maneuver, however, appears to be increasingly restricted. There is a widespread public belief that the government cannot reverse the nation's steady economic decline. Living conditions for most Sudanese probably will continue to worsen, and the imposition of additional austerity measures in the months ahead could threaten stability. The regime's credibility with the Sudanese public also has been damaged by growing corruption among senior officials. According to the Embassy, Nimeiri is perceived by many Sudanese as being out of touch with reality and surrounded by sycophants. Consequently, we believe that at least some members of the opposition, who do not support Nimeiri but previously saw him as preferable to other alternatives, may now have concluded that a change of leadership would be an improvement.

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Economic Disaster Avoided—For Now

Public discontent over the pronounced deterioration of the economy constitutes the principal threat to Nimeiri's continued rule. Inflation, estimated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) at an annual rate of 35 percent in 1982, remains high. Real GDP fell in the last four years as a result of a serious decline in agricultural production.[1] This has led to serious balance-of-payments problems that further retard economic development. As a result, the quality of life for most Sudanese, particularly in critical urban areas, has deteriorated markedly in recent years.

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Already hard hit by government mismanagement and severe foreign exchange shortages, production of most key crops in 1982-83 will be down even further as a result of below-normal rainfall. A major exception is cotton production, which is expected to be 25 percent greater than in 1981-82. Sudan's inadequate electric power supply, which has reduced output in the small industrial sector, is unlikely to improve until new generating capacity comes on line in late 1983 or early 1984. The departure of skilled workers for better paying jobs in the oil-rich Arab states continues to drain the nation's human resources, although their remittances are an important source of foreign currency earnings.

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Some of the country's economic problems stem from persistent government mismanagement. During the 1970s Sudan adopted policies that discouraged the growth of crops in which the country had the greatest comparative advantage and undertook a number of costly and ill-conceived industrial projects. Production and exports declined, while the demand for imports grew sharply. Moreover, the country was forced to pay sharply higher prices for such key imports as petroleum. As a result, Sudan amassed a staggering foreign debt burden, estimated in late 1982 at $7-8 billion.

Foreign exchange became particularly scarce after July 1982, when the IMF suspended a standby agreement intended to cover the balance-of-payments gap for 1982. The Fund acted because lower-than-expected export earnings, increased import requirements, and slow donor disbursements—particularly from some oil-rich Arab states—prevented Sudan from meeting its debt obligations to banks, official creditors, and to the IMF itself. During the latter part of 1982, while the government attempted to negotiate a new agreement with the IMF, the country's capital plant, particularly the transportation network, continued to deteriorate. Foreign assistance and domestic bank reserves, however, enabled the government to continue essential imports. There were temporary shortages of vital imports such as pesticides and pharmaceuticals, and late in the year gasoline and diesel stocks dropped below a one-week supply.

The approval in January 1983 of a new IMF standby agreement and the rescheduling in early February of Sudan's official debt has reduced the threat of default. The terms of the rescheduling agreement worked out with Western governments—to which Sudan would have been required in 1983 to make some $500 million in current and overdue payments—were generous. Creditor states agreed to a six-year grace period, during which only 50 percent of the interest due is to be paid. The remainder of the interest is to be added to the rescheduled debt. This arrangement slashed Sudanese payments to Western governments in 1983 to only $20 million, the most the government could afford. As of early April, Sudan was attempting to reschedule $1 billion in other payments that it owes to Arab oil-producing states, as well as $1.2 billion owed to commercial creditors. The negotiations are likely to be protracted, but Sudan's creditors have a considerable incentive to avoid forcing Khartoum into default. Consequently, they probably will eventually be forced to reach an agreement acceptable to Sudan. 25X1

In return for granting the new standby loan, the IMF insisted that Sudan implement new austerity measures. These included a 30-percent devaluation in November 1982, and in January 1983 a 70-percent increase in gasoline prices, a 129-percent increase in butane prices, and a 25-percent increase in electricity rates. The government also agreed to permit the eventual private import of wheat and sugar, to gradually phase out state-run corporations, and to remove food subsidies and price controls. 25X1 25X1

Most Sudanese resented the IMF program, and the devaluation was rejected by the National Assembly. Nimeiri, however, had no choice but to agree to the IMF terms to obtain crucial debt rescheduling and additional balance-of-payments assistance, and he ignored the National Assembly recommendation. To ease the immediate effects of the devaluation, the government gained IMF approval to raise government salaries, reduce income taxes, and place a subsidy on bread. Nevertheless, the austerity measures are onerous for most urban Sudanese and carry a significant political risk. 25X1

The overall economic outlook will not improve significantly until a number of rehabilitation and development projects are completed in the mid- and late 1980s. Moreover, the exploitation of Sudan's oil resources will not produce returns until the second half of the 1980s, the earliest a 1,425-km pipeline from the fields near Bentiu to Port Sudan can be completed. Reforms initiated in 1982 have begun to raise productivity, but the enormous size of the foreign debt and the worldwide recession have stymied efforts to reverse the country's economic decline. Moreover, the nation's serious agricultural production problems seem likely to persist into the next century. Sudan, therefore, faces at least two or three more years of hard times, during which it is likely that the IMF and aid donors will have to undertake additional rescue operations. 25X1 25X1

Domestic Opposition:
Disorganized and Ineffectual

Nimeiri has been able to neutralize his domestic opponents by co-opting conservatives—the Ansars and the Muslim Brotherhood—and suppressing the smaller, but better organized, leftist organizations—the National Unionist Party, the Baathists, and the Sudanese Communist Party. At times Nimeiri also has attempted to limit the effectiveness of the domestic opposition by supporting minority factions within the groups against their established leadership

Despite a gradual weakening of their strength since they were defeated by the Army in 1970, the Ansars, who constitute approximately one-fifth of Sudan's population of 21 million, are still a significant force politically. The Ansars constitute a movement that is largely rurally based, located mainly in the Darfur and Kordofan Regions and in the northern part of the Central Region. The principal Ansar leader, Sadiq al-Mahdi, returned from exile in 1977 under the terms of the national reconciliation, but he has since been increasingly at odds with the government. He has opposed Sudan's close alignment with Egypt and the United States and criticized Nimeiri's handling of the economy.

Nimeiri has attempted to weaken the Ansars by open acts of favoritism toward Sadiq's uncle, Ahmad al-Mahdi, who aspires to replace Sadiq as leader of the sect. Nimeiri appointed Ahmad to senior positions in the Sudanese Socialist Union, the country's only legal mass political organization. In return, Ahmad endorsed Nimeiri's reelection for a third term, an act that undercut Sadiq and allowed Nimeiri to exploit the rivalry between the two men. In November 1982 Sadiq's outspoken criticism of regime policies led the government to close his offices in Khartoum

Sadiq has been in and out of the country several times since he returned from exile.

Sadiq apparently believes that sooner or later Nimeiri will be forced from office and he is positioning himself to play an important role in a successor government.

The Muslim Brotherhood, the most conservative of all organized Islamic groups in Sudan, is a formidable force despite its small membership—estimated by the US Embassy at 100,000, although it could be considerably larger. Its main strength is in the universities and among professionals, especially doctors. For the most part it has eschewed the violence that has characterized the Brotherhood in Syria.

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In the early 1980s the regime was forced by growing public unhappiness with the economy to rely increasingly on the Brotherhood for support. Since 1977 the Brotherhood has sought to achieve the creation of a more Islamic society through cooperation with the government rather than confrontation. During student protests over commodity price increases, Turabi ordered the Brotherhood to restrict its activities to the campuses and not to participate in street demonstrations. By early 1983, however, Nimeiri was sufficiently alarmed by the Brotherhood's growing strength to take steps to reduce its influence.

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By supporting instead the number-two man in the Brotherhood, Yasin Omer Imam, Nimeiri apparently hoped to split the organization's leadership. Instead, his action may have strengthened Turabi's control over the Brotherhood and encouraged it to adopt a more active role against the government. Since the election, senior Brotherhood members, including Yasin Omer, have clearly indicated their support for Turabi.

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The National Unionist Party (NUP) is actively seeking the overthrow of Nimeiri. It reflects the views of the better educated and more secular merchants, civil servants, and professionals. They oppose the conservative forces represented by the Ansars and the Muslim Brotherhood and resent the dominant role of the Army. The party draws most of its strength from

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northern urban areas and from organized agricultural workers in large state-run farms south of Khartoum. To gain support in rural areas, it has periodically sought the support of the influential Khatmiyyah religious sect, the principal rival of the Ansars. The Mirghani family that leads the Khatmiyyah sect, however, appears to distrust the leftist leadership of the NUP.

Until his death in early 1982, the NUP was directed from exile by Sharif al-Hindi, who received assistance from Libya. Since then the party has been led by Ahmad Zein al-Abdin.

The Sudanese Baath Party has only a few hundred members and does not constitute a serious danger to the Nimeiri regime.

Despite Nimeiri's support for Iraq in the conflict with Iran, Sudanese Baathists have continued to engage in antiregime activity.

The Sudanese Communist Party was at one time the largest Communist party in Africa. It was seriously weakened by government repression following disorders in August 1979 in which the Communists played a significant part.

by early 1983 the party had been able to increase its membership to over 17,000, with twice that number of sympathizers.

it could indicate that the Communist Party, which retains considerable strength in the labor movement and among students, is again becoming a significant force and a potential threat to the regime.

The External Threat

The principal foreign threat to the Nimeiri regime stems from Sudanese dissidents supported by Libya and Ethiopia. Tripoli has provided money, arms, and training to a variety of Sudanese dissident groups for several years. Ethiopia has permitted these groups to establish bases on its territory and has provided them with logistic support.

Qadhafi's hostility to Nimeiri, originally related to the Libyan leader's desire to strike at Egypt through its more vulnerable neighbor and ally, has developed into a deep-seated personal animosity. Qadhafi supported coup attempts against Nimeiri in 1975 and 1976. Following a tenuous rapprochement between the two countries in 1977-78, the Libyan leader renewed his support for Sudanese oppositionists after Nimeiri endorsed the Camp David accords in September 1978. Until the withdrawal of Libyan forces from Chad in late 1981, Qadhafi used the Chad-Sudan border area as a staging ground for sabotage and air raids against Chadian insurgents based in Sudan.

Libyan efforts to forge Sudanese dissident groups into a broad opposition front, however, have been unsuccessful.

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Addis Ababa agreed in principle to involvement in efforts to overthrow Nimeiri when it signed a tripartite alliance with Tripoli and Aden in August 1981. In 1982, Ethiopian officials acceded to Libyan requests that they directly support Sudanese dissident operations from their territory.

Despite support from Libya and Ethiopia, the Sudanese dissident groups have very little chance of mounting a conventional military attack that could successfully overthrow the Nimeiri regime. According to the Sudan News Agency, a Libyan-sponsored coup attempt in February 1983 failed after Sudanese security officials arrested a number of dissidents involved in the plot. According to the news agency, Libyan aircraft and troops were prepared to aid the plotters. The principal threat posed by the dissident groups is the possibility that they could strike an important economic, strategic, or symbolic target,

The South:
Increasingly Restive [2]

A recent upsurge of murders and lawlessness in southern Sudan underscores the deteriorating relationship between the northern and southern regions of the country. North-south relations were relatively tranquil between February 1972—when the Addis Ababa agreement that ended the 17-year civil war in the south was signed—and early 1980 but have gone downhill for the past three years. The predominantly black African, non-Muslim southerners have long resented what they consider economic exploitation, discrimination, and other attempts by the predominantly Arab, Muslim northerners to impose their ways on the south.

Festering southern anger toward the north was aggravated by the government's decision in 1981 to build a small refinery at the northern town of Kusti rather than at Bentiu, which is close to recently discovered southern oilfields. The subsequent decision to abandon the refinery plan and instead build a pipeline from Bentiu to Port Sudan has failed to convince southerners that the regime is not deliberately trying to deprive the south of its natural resources.

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Southern distrust of the north also was deepened by Nimeiri's support for a proposal to split the south into three autonomous regions made in January 1981 by Joseph Lagu, president of the Southern Region from 1978 to 1980 and now national Second Vice President. The proposed plan generated increased political infighting between the Dinka, the largest tribe in the south, and non-Dinka tribes. The Dinkas, who had controlled the southern government for all but two years since 1971, saw Lagu's proposal as an effort to weaken Abel Alier, a Dinka who had served as southern regional president from 1973 until 1978 and who succeeded Lagu in 1980. Many southerners also regard the proposal as another attempt by the central government to increase northern influence in the south. In October 1981 Nimeiri attempted to ease the growing strife between Dinkas and non-Dinkas by replacing Alier's government with a military administration and temporarily dissolving the southern regional assembly. Despite continued opposition to the division of the south, the Sudanese News Agency confirmed in late May that Nimeiri intended to go ahead with the plan.

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The results of regional assembly elections held in the spring of 1982 left the Dinkas in control of 50 seats in the 110-member body. Delegates affiliated with Lagu from Eastern and Western Equatoria Provinces won 35 seats, and non-Dinka tribes won 25. The latter two groups combined to elect Joseph Tambura, a Lagu supporter, as southern regional president. Almost from its inception, bickering between the Dinkas and the Equatorians in the new coalition has been intense, and Tambura's ability to keep the southern government from collapsing is doubtful.

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Although continued economic deterioration in the south has been the major problem facing Tambura, his own political ineptitude has effectively paralyzed his government. In early March 1983 security officials arrested the vice president of the southern regional government and the speaker of the southern assembly, both of whom had been at odds with Tambura.

deepening discontent in the south could turn a festering problem into an insurgency.

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Southerners, who constitute more than half of the division, already are unhappy on other counts. They believe that they are discriminated against because of the tendency to base promotions on regional origins and by the use of Arabic at the Armed Forces Command and Staff College, a requirement that largely excludes southern officers who speak English or tribal dialects. Government attempts to rotate southern units to the north also have caused resentment among southern troops, who are reluctant to leave their families and farms. The use of force in mid-May against southern units that refused orders to transfer will increase north-south tensions and will weaken the ability of the 1st Division to conduct operations against the dissidents. (S NF NC OC)

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Although we do not believe that a renewal of the north-south civil war is imminent, increased unrest could cause serious problems for the central government.

In early 1983 the Army used a battalion-size unit of northern paratroopers to conduct a sweep in the Bentiu region, capturing and killing a small number of dissidents. The presence of northern troops, however, is strongly resented by southerners. Moreover, a prolonged large-scale intervention in the south would be unpopular with the Army and could weaken its allegiance to the Nimeiri regime.

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The Military:
Still Supporting the Regime

The Sudanese armed forces constitute Nimeiri's principal power base. The Army provided the means by which Nimeiri came to power in 1969, it proved loyal to him during the conflict with the Ansars in 1970, and it was Army support that enabled Nimeiri to regain power following an abortive Communist-led coup in July 1971. Without at least the acquiescence of a significant segment of the military, a move to depose Nimeiri would have little chance of success.

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relations would be less close, but the new government probably would continue to seek military and economic support from the West. 25X1

In the unlikely—but not impossible—event that officers sympathetic to the goals of Libya or other radical Arab states were to control a successor government, US interests in the country would suffer serious damage. Sudanese relations with the USSR and its allies could be expected to improve dramatically. 25X1